

The book cover features a dramatic landscape with a dark, stormy sky and a bright lightning bolt striking down. Below the sky, a rugged, reddish-brown mountain range is visible, with a turquoise lake nestled in a valley. The foreground shows a dark, rocky slope. The text is overlaid on this background.

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JAMES
ROLLINS**

Wm
MORROW
IMPULSE

CRASH
AND
BURN

A SIGMA FORCE SHORT STORY

Crash and Burn

A SIGMA FORCE SHORT STORY

JAMES ROLLINS



WILLIAM MORROW IMPULSE

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Crash and Burn

What's True, What's Not

An Excerpt from The Seventh Plague

Prologue

Chapter 1

About the Author

Also by James Rollins

Copyright

About the Publisher

Crash and Burn

April 17, 7:48 p.m.

Airborne over the North Atlantic

You've got to be kidding me.

A wolf whistle of appreciation drew Seichan's attention across the plush cabin of the Gulfstream G150. The configuration of the private jet allowed for four passengers, but at the moment she shared this flight from D.C. to Marrakesh with only one other traveler, but his size and bulk filled most of the plane's starboard side.

Joe Kowalski stood well over six feet, most of it muscles and scars. His legs stretched from one chair to the other, his boots propped on the leather seat. He cradled a long case open on his lap. He rubbed a finger along his lower lip, his craggy brows pinched in concentration as he studied the contents cushioned in the box. His other hand traced the contours of the snub-nosed shotgun resting there.

"Nice," he muttered.

Seichan frowned at him. "How about *not* playing with a gun at thirty-five thousand feet."

Talk about the wrong time, wrong place.

He scowled at her concern and picked up the weapon, turning it one way, then the other. "It's not like it's loaded." He cracked the action open, exposing the double chambers—along with the two shells resting there. He quickly removed them and cleared his throat. "At least, not *now*."

The case also held a belt of extra rounds. While the gun's side-by-side double barrels looked like something out of the Old West, Seichan knew there was nothing old-fashioned about the weapon. The label stamped inside the case confirmed this:

The military prototype was called the Piezer. The stock of the weapon housed a powerful battery. Each 12-gauge shell—rather than being filled with buckshot or rock salt—was packed with piezoelectric crystals capable of holding an electric charge. Once powered up, the weapon would electrify the load, and with a pull of a trigger, the fired shell would explode in midair, blasting out a shower of shocking crystals, each carrying the voltage equivalent of a Taser. With no need to trail wires, the nonlethal weapon had a range of fifty yards, perfect for crowd control situations.

“I thought we agreed to keep your new toy locked up until we landed,” she said.

Per mission protocol, their weapons—including her sheathed daggers—were stored in a camouflaged crate, one engineered to withstand most scrutiny.

He shrugged sheepishly. Plainly he must have gotten bored and decided to break those rules, wanting something to play with during the long flight.

“Pack it back up,” she told him. “Crowe said you could field test the weapon in your spare time, but he meant on the ground.”

And preferably well away from me.

They would be going their separate ways once they reached Morocco. She had been sent by Director Painter Crowe to investigate the black-market trafficking of stolen antiquities in Marrakesh. The funds financed various terrorist groups, and with her own past ties to such organizations, she was perfectly suited to infiltrate and expose the operation.

Kowalski, on the other hand, was hitching a ride, about to begin an extended leave of absence from Sigma Force. Once she landed in Marrakesh, he would continue on to Germany, to visit his girlfriend in Leipzig, where the woman was working at a genetics lab.

Besides sharing this flight, Seichan and Kowalski also shared the dubious honor of being the black sheep of Sigma Force. The covert group was part of DARPA, the Defense Department’s research-and-development administration. Its members were former Special Forces soldiers who had been retrained in various scientific disciplines to act as field agents

for DARPA, to protect U.S. interests against various global threats.

She and Kowalski did not fit that mold.

She was a former assassin, now employed off the books by Sigma. Kowalski had been a navy seaman who happened to be at the wrong place and wrong time, but who proved adept enough at blowing things up to serve as extra muscle and support for the group.

And while she and Kowalski shared this outsider status, the two could not be more different. He was all-American, loud and brash, rough around the edges, with a pronounced Bronx accent. She was Eurasian, svelte and nimble, trained for the shadows.

Still, despite their differences, she recognized a commonality. She had overheard him talking to his girlfriend Maria on the phone before their jet had lifted off. The relationship was new, untested, full of possibility. He smiled broadly when he talked, laughed with his entire body. In his voice, she heard the familiar undertones of longing and desire—some physical, some rising from deeper wellsprings.

Likewise, she had found someone, a man of remarkable ability and unfathomable depths of patience. He seemed to know when to draw close and when to pull back. It was a necessary skill to love someone like her. After decades in the shadows, to commit the acts she had done, she'd had to let that darkness inside.

Even now, she remained haunted, discovering her new life with Sigma was not all that different from her past. She still had to linger in the dark.

Not that I have any other choice.

After she'd betrayed her former employers, enemies now surrounded her on all sides. Her only refuge was within Sigma, but even there, she was a ghost, with only a handful of personnel aware of her presence or her past.

She turned to the window, to the sun sinking toward the ocean. Its brightness pained her, but she did not blink, trying to let that light deep inside her, to get it to chase away her black thoughts and dispel those shadows. But she knew better. It would be nightfall before much longer. Even the sun could not hold back the darkness forever.

The pilot called over the radio. “We’ll be touching down at Ponta Delgada in another fifteen minutes.”

She stared below the wings, toward the archipelago of volcanic islands stretching ahead of them. The Azores were an autonomous region of Portugal. Their jet would be landing on São Miguel, the largest of the archipelago’s nine islands—but only long enough to refuel. The Gulfstream’s range was not far enough to make the transatlantic trip in a single hop.

As the plane began its descent, she studied the sweep of the Azores, noting the tiny silvery lakes glinting from the basins of green calderas. Most of the populace clustered in small towns or the main city of Ponta Delgada. The bulk of those islands remained untouched.

The pilot came back on. “Secure the cabin for final—”

His words ended with a loud screech from the radio. At the same time, Seichan’s body was set on fire. Blinded by pain, she gasped as her skin burned. Kowalski howled from across the cabin. As she breathed flames, the entire plane bobbed. The jet rolled into a nosedive. Still on fire, Seichan felt herself rise from her seat, restrained by her lap belt.

Then it all ended.

Her sight returned, and the searing pain in her skin dulled to the smolder of a sunburn. Kowalski sat in a shocked hunch, his large mitts clamped to his armrests.

What the hell . . .

Though the agony had ended, the jet continued to plummet. She took a breath to collect herself and to see if the pilot regained control of the aircraft. When nothing happened, she snapped off her seat belt and fell toward the small cockpit. She forced the door open and hung from the threshold. Their pilot—a sixty-two-year-old air force veteran named Fitzgerald—slumped leadenly in his chair, held up by his restraints, but clearly unconscious—if not dead.

She dropped into the empty copilot seat and switched controls to her side. She grabbed the yoke with both hands and pulled back hard. Past the windshield, blue ocean filled the world, rising quickly toward her. She fought to haul the nose up.

C’mom, c’mom . . .

As the front of the plane slowly lifted, the view shifted,

showing a line of . . . then a fringe green forest . . . and finally the sheer flank of a volcano.

Though she had pulled out of the dive, their descent remained steep, their speed too fast. She had neither the time nor the clearance to sweep back into the air. A quick eye flick across the instrument panel—showing a plummeting altimeter and a map of a doomed glide path—confirmed her grim assessment.

We're going down.

Knowing this, she cut the throttle.

She hollered to Kowalski. "Crash position! Now!"

One-handed, she pulled her own restraints over her shoulders and snapped her belt in place. As the jet raced for the water, she continued to hold the yoke to her belly. She trimmed the flaps, struggling to keep the aircraft's wings even.

Still, at the end, she had to abandon the high-tech instruments and go by the seat of her pants. She stared out the window, eyeballing the ocean rushing toward her, noting the curved line of a beach ahead. Beyond it, a stretch of forest lined the base of a towering wall of black cliffs. But between the beach and the forested cliffs, a large resort shone in the last rays of the sun. Its dozen stories of white walls and windows glowed brightly, like the pearly gates of some tropical heaven.

And we're about to go crashing into them.

To avoid such a fiery end, Seichan had to attempt a hard water landing. As the ocean swept up, she waited until the last moment and timed her move as best she could. Just before they struck the water, she dropped the flaps and hit the throttle hard. Goosed by the sudden power, the plane flared up, nose lifting. The tail end hit the waves first. On that signal, she cut the engines. The rest of aircraft belly-slammed into the water.

Thrown forward into her restraints, she could do nothing more as the jet's momentum sent the craft skipping and spinning across the water like a flat stone. The tip of a wing struck a wave, sending the jet cartwheeling the last thirty yards, until it finally ground into sand, coming to a stop in the shallows.

She sagged in her own restraints, breathing hard, trying to

force her heart out of her throat.

"Still in one piece back here!" Kowalski called from the cabin. "Not so sure about the plane."

Of course, Kowalski was okay. The man had too few marbles to be truly rattled by anything.

"Help me with Fitzgerald," she ordered.

The pilot remained unconscious, but at least he appeared to be breathing. She unbuckled herself, then freed Fitzgerald, catching his weight as he fell forward.

Kowalski joined her and grabbed the pilot under his arms and hauled his prone body out of the cockpit. "What happened to him?"

"We'll figure it out later." She remembered the blast of fiery pain, but she had no clue as to its source or what it meant.

One problem at a time.

She wiggled past the pair and shouldered the cabin door open. A breeze blew in, bringing the scent of salt water, along with the smell of burning oil. A glance forward showed smoke rising from the crumpled engine cowling. Though they had been flying on a nearly empty fuel tank, the risk of an explosion remained.

She hopped into the thigh-deep water, soaking her boots and jeans. She hiked her jacket higher to keep it dry as waves washed over her legs.

She pointed to the beach. "Hurry!"

Kowalski jumped out, not bothering to keep his knee-length leather duster dry. He hauled Fitzgerald by his armpits and dragged the pilot behind him.

The group waded stiffly away from the side of the plane and climbed out onto the dry sand. By now, the sun had sunk into the ocean, leaving the skies aglow behind them, but ahead, the dark volcanic peak loomed, framed by the first sweep of stars.

She guessed they had crashed into one of the outer islands of the Azores.

But where exactly?

She stared down the beach. A hundred yards away, the resort she had spotted from the air appeared to be the only habitation. It rose from a dense forest of palms and dark trees. Flickering torches illuminated the hotel's many terraces. The

faint strains of music wafted over to them.

Seichan knew any help lay in that direction, but she remained on edge since the crash. *Something's not right here.*

Even Kowalski acknowledged this. "How come no one's running over here to check on us?"

A groan drew their attention to the sand. The pilot was finally stirring, shivering from being dragged through the cold water.

Kowalski dropped to a knee, helping Fitzgerald sit up. "Hey, man, you're okay."

But the man wasn't.

His eyes snapped toward Kowalski, the groan turning into a low growl. Shocked, Kowalski leaned away. Fitzgerald's face contorted into a mask of rage, and he shoved Kowalski back, forcefully enough to knock the large man on his rear. The pilot leaped to his feet, but he remained leaning on the knuckles of one hand.

Fitzgerald's eyes swung between the two of them, his lips snarling, baring his teeth.

Then without warning, he leaped toward Seichan, likely going for the smaller target. Seichan caught him, and used his momentum to toss his weight over her hip. Or that was the plan. He hooked an arm around her waist, moving far faster than she expected from a sixty-year-old. Trapped together, they both fell hard to the sand. She landed on her back and twisted her head to the side as he snapped at her face, coming close to taking off her ear.

They grappled for several long breaths, rolling across the sand. She fought to break free, but the man's muscles were iron hard, his reflexes cunning. She finally got her legs bunched under her and kicked him in the stomach, hard enough to finally break his hold and send him flying back.

Before she could even regain her feet, Fitzgerald landed in a crouch, skidding in the sand but staying impossibly upright. He lunged again for her.

But a blast sounded behind her. A scintillating blue cascade shot over her head and struck the pilot in the chest. A few shards of the brilliance shattered past his form and danced over the dark sand.

Fitzgerald sprawled across the beach, his limbs jerking and

twitching. His wet clothes ran with fiery spiderwebs of electricity. As the dazzling effect faded, his body went slack and limp, out cold again.

Seichan looked back to see Kowalski standing with his new toy at his shoulder. One muzzle of the Piezer's double barrels still glowed softly from the discharged energy. Clearly, the man had refused to abandon the weapon and hidden it under his duster. The gun's ammunition belt was already hooked around his waist.

Thank god for the man's love of his toys.

Kowalski lowered his shotgun, eyeing it appreciatively. "Guess it works."

She glanced down at the unconscious pilot.

It certainly does.

She studied the smoking jet, wondering if she should risk going for her own weapons.

"Company's coming," Kowalski said, drawing her attention down the beach.

Past the resort property, a pair of headlamps had blinked on and shone brightly along the dark curve of sand. The rumble of an engine echoed over the water, as a large truck started in their direction.

"Looks like someone's finally checking for survivors," Kowalski said.

After all this strangeness, she suspected the opposite was more likely true. She pointed to Fitzgerald. "Drag him into the forest."

"Why are we—?"

"Just do it. Now!"

As Kowalski obeyed, she rushed over and grabbed a dry palm frond. She did her best to erase their path into the woods, or at least obscure the number of footprints. Once under the bower, she tossed her makeshift broom aside.

"Keep moving. Find a place to hide Fitzgerald."

"Then what are we going to do?"

She stared through the trees toward the flickering torches. "Let's go inquire about a late check-in."

8:38 p.m.

Hidden behind a fragrant hedgerow of blue-flowering hydrangeas, Seichan studied the shadowy grounds behind the resort. Nothing stirred across the acres of manicured lawns, and garden paths. The only noise came from a few small fountains burbling from decorative ponds. Higher up, a group of candlelit tables illuminated a second-story dining terrace, all deserted.

Definitely something wrong here.

Closer now, she could tell the resort property was a new construction. It still showed signs of ongoing work: scaffolding along one side, tilled but unplanted garden beds, rows of sapling trees waiting in buckets.

Still, from the faint strains of music and the flaming torches, it was clear the place was open for business, even if it was only a soft opening to test staff and facilities.

Beside her, Kowalski swatted at something dark swept past his cheek. "What's with all these friggin' bats?"

She had noted the same while crossing through the woods. Scores of leathery wings had flitted among the branches, accompanied by an ultrasonic chorus that set her teeth on edge. Across the grounds, smoky clouds of bats swirled in bands, rising low and sweeping high. More and more seemed to be flowing down from the dark flank of the volcano behind them, rising out of caves and rocky roosts to hunt the night.

But the bats weren't her true concern at the moment.

She glanced to her left. Off by the beach, lights glowed through the trees, marking the location of the truck and whoever had been drawn to the crashed jet. Occasional louder voices reached them, the words too muffled to make out clearly. She knew searchers were probably already combing the woods after finding the aircraft empty. She and Kowalski needed to get under cover quickly, and the hotel offered them a multitude of hiding places.

Kowalski nudged her and pointed. "By that ATV. Are those legs sticking out from behind it?"

She peered in that direction and saw he was right. "Let's check it out."

She shifted over to an opening in the hedgerow and entered the rear grounds, staying low and avoiding the occasional torch burning along the periphery. The small Kawasaki ATV had a trailer attached to it, loaded with trays of potted flowers. It was parked beside an empty garden bed. A man lay facedown in the grass next to the trailer. From the looks of his green overalls, he was part of a landscaping crew.

She saw his chest rise and fall.

Unconscious.

Kowalski leaned down, his finger reaching to check a pulse.

She pulled him back, picturing Fitzgerald's snarling countenance. "Don't." She motioned to the tall patio doors under the dining terrace. "Let's get inside, out of the open."

She headed straight across, hurrying faster as flashlights bobbed through the forest to her left. She reached the doors and tugged. *Locked*. She shifted along the back of the building, testing each door until finally one gave way. She tugged it open and pushed into a dark hallway with Kowalski shadowing her.

"What now?" he whispered.

"Weapons."

She headed down the carpeted hallway, picturing the dining terrace outside. *There must be a kitchen nearby*. Halfway along the empty hall, she found a door marked *Empregados Apenas*. Her Portuguese was rusty, but the sign was easily translatable as *Employees Only*.

She tested the knob, found the door unlocked, and headed through it. Past the threshold, a narrow staircase led up. She mounted the steps.

"C'mon."

The spaces back here were more utilitarian. The walls were unpainted, further evidence that the hotel was a work in progress. At the next landing, she followed the smell of frying grease and spices to a set of swinging stainless steel doors.

She peeked one side open and discovered a large commercial kitchen, with stacks of ovens and rows of gas burners. Several pots bubbled and steamed; a few had boiled over. A set of four pans smoked with what might have been fish fillets, now charred into blackened crisps.

The reason for the mess was clear. A dozen or more bodies

in white aprons were sprawled across the floor, limbs tangled, some atop one another. Like the gardener, they looked like they were still breathing.

“Careful,” Seichan whispered. “Watch where you step.”

She headed in first and worked her way across the space, placing each foot gingerly so as not to disturb those on the floor. She did not want a repeat of the incident with Fitzgerald.

Though uncertain of what was going on, she had begun to get an inkling. She remembered the flare of fiery pain aboard the jet. Seated in front, the pilot must have taken the full brunt of that unknown force. Insulated in back, she and Kowalski were less impacted.

She stepped over the fat belly of a man whose chef’s hat lay deflated next to his head. He snored loudly. Whatever blow was struck here did not appear fatal. Still, from Fitzgerald’s heightened aggression and adrenaline-fueled strength, there was lasting damage, some violent alteration of personality.

She reached a row of cutting utensils and grabbed a long butcher’s knife and a smaller boning blade. Kowalski picked up a big meat cleaver. He still had his shotgun clutched in one hand, but clearly he wanted something more lethal if it came down to hand-to-hand combat.

“This is more like it,” he said, stepping back.

His heel struck a sleeping dishwasher in the nose. A sharp snort of pain alerted them to the misstep. They turned to find a pair of narrowed eyes glaring up at them. The worker jerked his limbs under him, again moving with shocking speed. He leaped up—only to be met with the thick wooden handle of Kowalski’s cleaver coming down. The impact sounded like a hammer hitting a coconut. The dishwasher seemed to hang in the air for a beat, then his body collapsed back to the floor.

“That’s right,” Kowalski said. “Go back to sleep.”

Seichan bent down. The man’s eyes had rolled white, but he should be all right, except for the goose egg he’d find behind his left ear later. She straightened and scowled at Kowalski.

“I know, I know.” He waved her on. “Watch my step.”

She led the way out of the kitchen but noted a tall cake on a serving trolley near the door. It was frosted with pink flowers and displayed a cartoonish red dog saying *Parabéns, Amelia!*

Feliz aniversário! Clearly someone was celebrating a birthday. Though the presence of only nine candles made her blood run cold.

“Let’s go,” she said, and hurried out of the kitchen and down a short hall.

Another set of double doors opened into a four-story lobby. To her left was the torch-lit dining terrace. She headed right, wanting to get a view out to the grounds bordering the beach. She pictured the child’s birthday cake and rushed faster. Ahead, a series of tall patio doors had been rolled open. A gentle sea breeze wafted into the marble interior—carrying with it a smattering of bats that swept in diving arcs through the crystal chandeliers.

Closer by, other bodies dotted the lobby’s tile floor or were slumped in chairs. She headed for a cocktail lounge opposite the reception desk. Its bar abutted the floor-to-ceiling glass wall that overlooked the ocean. They could shelter behind the counter and still spy upon the grounds outside.

She wound through the tables, avoiding a nicely dressed woman collapsed on the floor next to a shattered martini glass.

Circling behind the bar, Seichan drew Kowalski alongside her.

“Stay low,” she warned.

The space behind the counter was occupied by the crumpled figure of a man in a pressed black suit. He had fallen to his rear, his back leaning against a tall, glass-fronted wine refrigerator. His head lolled to the side, with a rope of drool hanging from his lips.

She pointed to the bartender, but before she could say a word Kowalski waved her on.

“Watch my step,” he said. “I know.”

They crossed over the obstacle and hunkered down at the far end, where a window offered an expansive view across a hedge-lined terrace that surrounded a midnight blue pool.

Kowalski settled with a sigh. He had nabbed a bottle of whiskey from a shelf and cracked the seal with his teeth. As she frowned at him, he mumbled around the cap. “What? I’m thirsty.” He spat out the lid and cocked his head toward the window. “Besides, it’s a party.”

She returned her attention to the poolside terrace. Tables had been set up across the space, each bearing centerpieces of pink balloons. As elsewhere, bodies were strewn all around. Torsos were draped across dishes; chairs had toppled over. Servers lay amid platters of broken dishes and glasses. Most of the figures appeared to be adults.

Except for the table in the center.

A triple set of balloon bouquets decorated that spread. To the side, a wide bench supported a stack of gaily wrapped presents. All around, small bodies—like a flock of felled sparrows—dotted the tiled pavement. At the head, a tiny figure lay slumped to the table, her face turned to the side, as if too exhausted to hold up her head, burdened by the paper crown she wore.

Here must be the reason for this celebration.

Seichan remembered the child's name, written in pink icing.
Amelia.

The girl was clearly loved, likely the child of one of the staff or management. The family was probably taking advantage of the resort's soft opening to throw the girl this private party.

Seichan wondered what it would be like to be that girl, to have grown up with such all-encompassing love, to have your life celebrated under the sun. She found it nearly incomprehensible to imagine, having spent her early years in the alleys of Bangkok and Phnom Penh, then later in the stygian folds of the Guild. She stared at that bright paper crown and felt the shadows within her grow darker by contrast.

"Truck's coming back," Kowalski said.

She shifted her attention to the stretch of beach on the far side of the pool. Unlit and gloomy, washed by black waves, the sands grew brighter as the large truck trundled over from the crash site. Its headlamps speared across the tiny bay, revealing an unpaved gravel road on its far side, cutting through the forest, likely heading to some small town or village.

She willed the truck to keep heading that way.

Instead, the truck braked to a stop, its lights shining across a marble staircase that climbed from the beach to the terrace. The vehicle had a double cab with an open bed. Men with

rifles and flashlights hopped out of the back, and doors popped open, but it was what was braced in the bed that drew Seichan's full attention.

Before evacuating the vehicle, the crew's flashlights revealed a refrigerator-sized steel box with thick cables running to a row of car batteries. Topping the device was a meter-wide metal dish, swiveled halfway up, pointing toward the sky.

That's gotta be the cause for whatever happened here.

Kowalski nodded toward the group climbing the steps. "Fitzgerald."

The pilot was on his feet, his hands tied behind his back. He looked dazed, stumbling along the steps, but a giant dressed in black commando gear had Fitzgerald's elbow clamped in a firm grip and held him up, forcing him to climb the stairs. Still, the pilot seemed to have come to his senses. Though cowed, he searched around, plainly trying to comprehend what was happening.

Seichan studied the pilot. Was Fitzgerald's recovery just a matter of time or had they given him some agent to counteract his mania?

Her gaze returned to Amelia.

But a sharp voice drew her attention back to the group as they reached the pool deck. The words echoed across the terrace and through the open patio doors.

"Fear not, gents. Noises won't wake them." The silver-haired speaker wore a crisp white suit, his accent distinctly British. He waved an arm over the tables as they drew closer. "From our preliminary studies, they're deaf in this comatose state. But take care not to otherwise disturb their slumber. They will attack anything that moves."

He was accompanied by a younger bearded man in a beige uniform, clearly Persian, likely Iranian. He spoke as the group drew nearer to the hotel. "Dr. Balchor, this alteration in the victims' mental status, tell me more. If we are to continue financing your research, the army will want full details of your progress."

"Of course, Colonel Rouhani. What you're seeing here is a side effect of Colossus." He motioned toward the device aboard the truck. "One we had not anticipated. My initial

research goals were to build your army a new *active denial system*, a nonlethal defensive energy weapon. Typical systems used by current police and military forces employ microwave beams that penetrate the top layers of the skin to trigger an excruciatingly painful experience. But today's systems have limited range and scope."

"And Colossus?"

Balchor smiled proudly. "I wanted to create a system that could do the same, but with a scope capable of taking down entire city blocks, even penetrating buildings."

Rouhani looked around. "And you achieved this how?"

"It's technical, but basically I discovered that by crossing a high-powered microwave beam with an electromagnetic pulse, I could produce a unique resonance wave. The resulting beam is capable of passing through most solid objects in order to strike its intended targets. Again, I thought the beam would only act as a *deterrent*, triggering intense, debilitating pain in those caught in its path."

Seichan remembered that effect. Her skin still ached from that phantom burn.

Balchor continued, "But upon modulating that wave, I discovered it could penetrate *deeper* than just the outer layers of the skin. The electromagnetic component of the beam could reach the brain. Now, normally an electromagnetic pulse—an EMP—has no deleterious effects on living tissue, so you can imagine my shock to see victims collapse and have their behavior altered."

Rouhani frowned. "So then what is happening?"

"To answer that very question, it took further investigation. Eventually I came across research being conducted in China, where scientists had discovered that a certain frequency of an EMP could cause an increase in vascular permeability in the cerebral cortex. In other words, it makes a brain's blood vessels more *leaky*. My device was doing something similar, only affecting the permeability of *neurons* directly."

"I don't understand," Rouhani said. "Why is that significant?"

"Because leaky neurons *can't* conduct electricity properly. The result is that Colossus shuts down a target's cerebral

cortex, knocking them out. If woken, the subjects react at a primitive level. It's all that still functions. Pure fight or flight—though mostly *fight*, as it turns out. Spiked on adrenaline, the subjects have proven to be inordinately strong and aggressive."

Rouhani nodded. "That is why you claimed that Colossus was the first *biological* EMP."

"Indeed. A typical EMP knocks out electronic circuits without harming humans or other biological life. But when modulated and crossed with a high-powered microwave—an HPM—the result is the opposite. Colossus targets living subjects, those with an advanced cerebral cortex, while leaving anything electronic untouched."

"So such a weapon could incapacitate an enemy, yet leave the infrastructure intact for an invading force to utilize."

"Precisely. And as you can see, we've made good progress. But I'd still like to understand this effect in more detail. It is one of the reasons for today's test firing, both as a demonstration for you and to further my own studies." Balchor turned to the steroid-bulked giant holding Fitzgerald hostage. "Dmitry, have your men pick out seven or eight subjects for further examination at the lab. I'll want a sampling of all ages for a proper assessment."

Dmitry nodded and yelled orders in Russian to his other men. From the giant's razor-cropped hair, he was clearly ex-military, probably acting as a security detachment for the field test of this weapon.

His men readied long-barreled handguns, loading in feathered darts, plainly intending to tranquilize their targets prior to hauling them away. His seven-man team spread out, calling to one another, searching for the best subjects.

A pair approached the children's table. The two eyed Amelia and nodded a confirmation to each other. One man lifted his gun and fired into the child's neck. The girl jerked, rolled slightly to the side as if about to wake, then slumped back down as the fast-acting sedative kicked in.

Seichan's hands balled into tight fists.

Motherfu—

The shooter stood guard over the girl as other subjects were picked out. One target—a twenty-something young man—

reacted more vigorously to the dart's impact. He swatted blindly and flew to his feet, stumbling in a circle. A second feathered dart bloomed on his chest, but by then, he had trampled over two others. One lunged up and went for the groggy young man, clawing at his face. The other scrabbled low across the tiles, going for the shooter.

Before the matter escalated out of hand, another gunman stepped forward with a regular pistol and fired twice—making two clean head shots—and bloodily ended the threat.

The young troublemaker, now doubly sedated, slumped heavily to the ground.

As the remainder of the crew worked through the partygoers, making their selections, Balchor led the Iranian colonel toward the patio doors. "Let's head inside. I'll buy you a drink while Dmitry's men finish up here."

"Just water." Rouhani looked shaken up by the violent episode. He cast a worried eye at the remaining thirty or forty bodies still strewn across the terrace.

"Ah, yes, sorry. I forgot your faith forbids the use of alcohol. Luckily my religion is *science*, and a glass of champagne is well deserved under the circumstances."

Rouhani suddenly ducked and batted at his head. A small black shape fluttered away. "Why are there so many bats?"

Balchor searched up at the dark clouds winging and spiraling above the terrace. Occasional streams shot lower, dive-bombing and cartwheeling, casting off individual bats that glided through the assembly outside.

"I believe the wave must have agitated them from their caves, stirring them up. With their keen sonic senses, they might have been drawn here, zeroing in on the source of the beam." Balchor shrugged and headed toward the patio door. "It's interesting—and one of the reasons we run field tests. To see how such a weapon performs in real-world scenarios. That includes bats and all."

Seichan lost sight of them as they entered the lobby, but she heard their footsteps approaching across the hard marble. She glanced up at the wall of bottles over the bar, suddenly questioning her choice of hiding place.

Kowalski must have realized the same and firmed his grip on his shotgun. He shifted to her side of the bar, both their

backs now pressed against the counter.

Dmitry had accompanied the pair, still holding Fitzgerald. “What about the man we find in woods?” he asked, his English stilted and heavily accented.

The footsteps stopped, and Balchor answered, “The man claims to have been the only one aboard the plane. So we may be fine.”

Seichan shared a look with Kowalski.

Good going, Fitzgerald.

“But, Dmitry, I think a more vigorous interrogation of the pilot is in order before we vacate the island. I’ll leave you and your men to handle that once they finish up here.”

“Still, what about his plane?” Rouhani asked. “*Why* did it crash? I thought Colossus didn’t affect electronic systems.”

“Indeed it doesn’t. I suspect the beam we aimed from the parking lot toward the hotel must have reflected off the building—or off the cliffs behind it—and struck the aircraft by accident.”

Seichan bit back a groan at their bad luck.

Definitely wrong place, wrong time.

Balchor continued, “The backwash must have been painful enough to make the pilot lose control but not strong enough for the full neurological impact.”

Seichan knew the good doctor was wrong about that last part, which made her wonder again about Fitzgerald’s recovery. Clearly Balchor’s team hadn’t administered any counteragent to help Fitzgerald return to his senses. She glanced over to the weapon in Kowalski’s hand, remembering the doctor’s description of Colossus’s effect, how it could turn off the electrical flow through the cerebral cortex.

Had the shock delivered by Kowalski’s weapon restarted that flow, like some defibrillator for the brain?

The footsteps continued again, heading toward the bar.

Off to the side, she watched Amelia being lifted from her chair, her paper crown fluttering to the tabletop. The gunman hauled her over his shoulder like a sack of flour and headed toward the truck on the beach.

“What will you do with the rest of the people out there?” Rouhani asked as the pair reached the counter, speaking

directly over where she and Kowalski hid.

Balchor sighed heavily. "I'll blast another wave as we leave. Prior tests show that a second insult to such afflicted individuals results in total brain death. They won't be telling any stories." He clapped his hands, changing the subject. "It looks as if this bar is self-service at the moment, so I'll have to go around and fetch my own champagne."

We're out of time.

Seichan lifted a fist in front of Kowalski, signaling him.

Don't move.

After getting a nod from him, she turned to her other side and kicked the man sharing their hiding place. The bartender's head snapped up, throwing a rope of drool that struck Seichan in the cheek. She remained a statue, not even blinking, recalling Balchor's earlier warning about the newly awakened.

They will attack anything that moves.

Rouhani leaned over the counter, his head turned, calling over to Balchor. "Maybe I will take a small drink after all."

The bartender was happy to assist.

The man burst to his feet and dove at the Iranian. Caught off guard, Rouhani failed to react in time. The bartender's fingers latched on to the colonel's throat. Rouhani tried to push off the bar to escape.

Not so fast.

Seichan leaped up and twisted around. She swung her arm down and stabbed the stolen butcher's knife through the back of the colonel's hand, pinning it to the mahogany bar. Without waiting, she rolled over the countertop and landed in a crouch on the far side.

Balchor was already running for the patio doors, shouting for help.

Before she could give chase, she had another obstacle to address.

Across the cocktail lounge, Dmitry shoved Fitzgerald to the floor and reached for a holstered sidearm.

Not good.

Kowalski had their only gun.

She glanced to her right, hoping her partner saw the threat,

but Kowalski was focused elsewhere. At the bar, Rouhani struggled and gurgled. The bartender's teeth were sunk deep into the man's neck, ripping his throat open. Kowalski fired his Piezer—but not at the Russian. The scintillating blue flare struck the bartender, sending him flying and hopefully back to sleep.

Still, the dazzling blast succeeded in startling Dmitry. The Russian fell back several steps, but unfortunately, he had freed his sidearm by now.

Using the momentary distraction, Seichan flipped the boning knife in her fingers and flung it across the lounge. Dmitry easily dodged the blade—but the Russian wasn't her target.

The knife struck the thigh of the woman behind Dmitry. She was the bar patron sprawled on the floor next to a shattered martini glass. The pain of the impaled blade drove the woman to her feet with a furious cry. She looked for the nearest person to blame.

Caught off guard, Dmitry could not turn in time. The woman hit him broadside, taking him to the floor. But the Russian was no amateur. He tossed the woman away and rolled back to his feet, but the sudden blow had knocked his pistol from his grip.

It lay under a table next to him.

He made a move in that direction, but Kowalski fired at him. A fiery blue blast exploded over the tabletop, sparing the Russian sheltered below from the brunt of the electrifying charge. Still, several crystals managed to hit him and drove him away, his face tight with pain. Dmitry twisted around, dug in his toes, and dove toward the patio door.

"Have to reload," Kowalski called out.

Seichan rushed forward, diving across the floor. She scooped up the abandoned handgun, a .50-caliber Desert Eagle, and fired at Dmitry. But the Russian, running low, pursuing his employer, had made it out to the terrace, where a storm was brewing.

In his hurry to escape, Balchor must have stepped on a few comatose patrons, rousing them in his wake. They in turn disturbed others. Cries and screams rose out there, accompanied by the breaking of furniture.

Kowalski's weapon blasted again. Seichan ducked and turned in time to see the sharply dressed madwoman go flying backward, her chest dancing with blue fire.

Almost forgot about her.

Out on the terrace, Dmitry fled through the escalating riot, punching and elbowing his way forward. Across the pool, Balchor tripped and fell down the far steps, landing near the bumper of the truck. One of Dmitry's men helped him up, guiding him toward the cab as the engine growled louder, preparing to leave.

Kowalski skidded up next to her, the muzzle of his weapon glowing. "All set. What now?"

She ignored him for the moment and picked up the boning blade that had knocked free during the scuffle and crossed to Fitzgerald. "How're you feeling?"

The pilot sat up, looking stunned, but nodded. "O . . . okay. Better."

Good.

He had clearly returned to his senses, and she could guess why.

As she sliced the man's bonds and freed him, she finally answered Kowalski's question. She nodded to his weapon. "That seems to shock them out of their madness." She pointed out to the patio. "So you're on crowd control."

She swung around and headed in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" Kowalski shouted after her.

She pictured Amelia. The girl was already aboard the truck with the others. "Making sure somebody has a happy birthday."

9:09 p.m.

Standing beside the unplanted garden bed, Seichan yanked the pin connecting the flower-laden trailer from the Kawasaki ATV and hopped onto the seat. Earlier she had noted the sleeping gardener's keys were still in the ignition.

She started the engine and gunned the throttle, bucking the

vehicle up on its back wheels. Then the front tires slammed down, and she shot forward. She cut across the newly planted lawn and over gravel paths, aiming for the dark wing still under construction.

No lights shone there, but such places were where she worked best.

In the shadows.

She wasn't the only one. The air was full of bats, swooping and keening in ultrasonic fury. The winged horde had grown tenfold thicker in just the short time she had been inside the hotel. A stray bat struck her face and fluttered off, leaving a welt of pain. She ignored it and sped faster, her knobby tires chewing through the terrain. She dared not slow.

A minute ago, as she had exited the back of the resort, she had heard the truck engine's roar settle into a steady growl.

The others were already leaving.

With Balchor's team having a head start, she refused to lose any more ground. She reached the far corner of the resort and sped around the turn, lifting up on two tires, challenging the limits of the ATV. As she cleared the bend, she had to dodge through an array of construction equipment and supplies: piles of concrete pavers, stacks of lumber, a parked backhoe.

She cursed the obstacle course, trying not to slow down. In her haste, her front bumper clipped a crated statue. The ATV skidded sideways. Instead of braking, she let it spin a bit further, then gunned the engine and sent the vehicle racing for a slab of granite that had slipped off its stack and fallen crookedly in front of her. She shot up the makeshift ramp, caught air, and flew several yards. She landed with a crunch and a bounce in the gravel of a parking lot.

Finally clear of the construction zone, she sped toward the road that led into the forest. Distantly through the trees, she spotted the rear lights of the trucks. The fleeing vehicle was even farther ahead than she had feared.

Behind her, the occasional shotgun blast echoed, continuing proof that Kowalski was still alive and doing his best to manage crowd control. She left him to his work and raced to the road and into the forest. She kept her lights off and followed the glow through the trees.

The road paralleled the curves and bends of the island's

coast, allowing her to stay out of direct sight, but eventually the path straightened. Fearing she would be spotted, she guided her ATV to the edge of the trees, doing her best to stay in the darker shadows under the canopy, hiding from the moon and stars.

The truck suddenly veered to the left, leaving the road, which continued following the coastline. She hurried to close the distance. As she reached the corner, she discovered the turnoff led to a long pier, where a floatplane—a Cessna Caravan—waited at its end. A large cargo hatch was open on one side, its lighted interior shining in the darkness.

Fifty yards ahead, the truck had pulled alongside the base of the pier. Men busied themselves around it.

She could've abandoned the ATV and gone on foot, using the cover of the forest, but she heard Balchor shout.

"Get Colossus onto the plane! Then the test subjects!"

She pictured the paper crown falling from Amelia's bowed head and made a sharp turn onto the side road and headed straight for the truck. She raised her huge pistol—the stolen Desert Eagle—and fired over the hood of the truck. She struck a man in the shoulder, sending him spinning from the impact of the large-caliber slug. The recoil almost tore the pistol from her grip, but she tightened her fingers and kept her aim high, away from the back bed and cab, fearing she might hit one of those "test subjects."

Return fire sparked toward her, but the shots were wild as the crew was caught by surprise. She crouched low, balancing her wrist on the ATV's short windshield, and fired back.

Four men managed to lug the dish device out of the bed and ran with it down the dock, dragging cables. Balchor fled alongside them, guarded by Dmitry. The bulk of the truck blocked her from shooting after them. Still, she dropped another Russian by the back bumper. The rest of the crew finally abandoned the vehicle and followed the others—especially as the floatplane's engine roared louder, readying to depart. Its propellers spun faster.

As Seichan reached the truck, coming in fast, she braked hard and skidded the ATV sideways, slamming broadside into it. She hopped out of the seat and quickly checked the rear cab and back bed. Sedated bodies were tossed inside both

compartments like so much firewood. She spotted the thin limbs of a child.

Amelia . . .

She shifted to the front of the truck, leveling her big pistol across the hood of the vehicle. Balchor was already aboard the plane, waving for the others to haul Colossus into the cargo hold with him. Dmitry helped, looking as if he could pick up the unwieldy contraption all by himself.

She held off shooting, afraid of drawing return fire toward the truck, where a stray round could injure or kill those sleeping inside. Plus, if her count was right, she was down to a single round. Still, such restraint made her grit her teeth in frustration.

Even before the final man was aboard, the plane headed across the water. The last straggler tossed the dock lines and dove into the hold. Seichan watched the plane gain speed and rise off the water, skimming the waves, then climbing higher. She imagined Balchor's research lab must be hidden on one of the many tiny islands that dotted the North Atlantic. She would leave it to Painter to discover where the doctor might be holed up.

Impotent and angry, she watched the Cessna continue upward—but then the wings tilted. The aircraft swung in a wide, low turn, coming back around. Seichan glanced over her shoulder toward the resort. Distantly a shotgun blast echoed to her. She faced the floatplane again as it circled in her direction. The cargo hatch was still open. The interior cabin lights revealed men clustered around Colossus, positioning the dish to face the door.

Apparently the bastards weren't leaving without first saying good-bye. They must intend to deliver a parting shot before they fled home. She remembered Balchor's description of the effect of a second wave striking those already afflicted.

Total brain death.

She retreated several steps, watching the Cessna complete its slow turn, the open hatch coming around. Men fled back into the hold. She spotted a large bulk standing behind Colossus.

Dmitry.

The Russian loosened the dish and swiveled it down. He

pointed toward the forest ahead of her—but that was not the true objective. As the plane turned, the device's wave would soon sweep over her and the truck.

Though there was no sound, no visible sign, she *felt* Colossus activate. It was like a sunburst in the forest, the heat burning her face and arms—and she knew this was just the weapon's backwash. Her skin grew steadily hotter as the plane continued to turn, swinging the beam's full force toward her.

Still, she kept her position, determined to guard the truck and its occupants.

She planted her legs, cradling the Desert Eagle in both hands. She lifted her arms and aimed toward the cargo hold, toward Dmitry. Her skin burned, her eyes wept, but she held steady. The rising pain made her want to scream—so she did as she fired.

The big gun blasted, the recoil driving her arms up.

She failed to hit Dmitry.

But again he wasn't her target.

The large-caliber slug sparked off the upper lip of the dish; the impact kicked the loosened dish up, pointing it toward the roof of the cargo hold. Sharp screams of agony cut through the engine's low roar as the searing wave washed over the passengers.

The plane canted wildly. Then the nose lifted, shooting the plane higher and away, as if the pilot were trying to escape the fire in the rear cabin. Then it dipped down, wings bobbling back and forth. But as it fled toward the resort, its path began to straighten.

She scowled.

Someone must have managed to switch Colossus off.

The aircraft steadied and banked over the resort, turning toward the volcanic cliffs—but would it continue away or would the bastards come around and try again to blast the resort with Colossus's beam?

Seichan held her breath.

In the end, the decision was taken from them.

The large dark cloud that swirled above the hotel suddenly gusted higher, spiraling toward the source of the ultrasonic blast. The plane was quickly lost in a mass of furious bats.

Again the aircraft wobbled wildly, as if its wings were

trying to swat away the bats. Its engine coughed, likely inhaling some of the horde. Blinded and assaulted, the Cessna dipped and dove faster over the treetops, still out of control, canting madly—then slammed into the nearby volcanic cliffs and exploded.

A fireball lit up the black rock, then rolled higher, trailing smoke.

Seichan let out the breath she had been holding.

But another distant shotgun blast reminded her that there was still work to do.

She crossed over to the truck, discovered the keys were still in the ignition after the team's hasty departure, and climbed inside. In short order, she had the truck turned around and was trundling back to the resort.

As she reached the beach, she parked the vehicle at the foot of the wide staircase that led up to the terrace. The truck's headlights revealed dazed figures seated on the steps, some crying, others holding their heads in their hands.

She climbed out, wary at first, but it was soon clear that the men and women here had recovered from their madness, the same as Fitzgerald. The likely source of their "cure" called out from the upper deck.

"Is that the last of them?" Kowalski yelled.

"Think so!" Fitzgerald answered. "At least out here!"

Seichan hurried up the steps. She reached the top in time to see Kowalski grab a middle-aged woman by the face and shove her into the pool. Five other figures splashed and howled in the waters, teeth gnashing, hands clawing.

Kowalski noted her arrival. "Check this out."

He stepped back, aimed his Piezer at the pool, and fired.

A flash of blue fire shot into the water. Electricity danced outward in sparks and skittering lines across the surface. The half-dozen bodies—trapped in the pool and caught in that shocking wake—shook and twitched in the water. But as the effect faded, the figures slumped and stumbled around in bewilderment, still conscious, but plainly returning to their senses.

Fitzgerald called and waved to them, ready to help them out. Other recovered patrons came forward to assist him.

Seichan glanced to Kowalski as he hiked his weapon to his

shoulder. A lit cigar was clamped between his back molars.

When did he have time to—

Never mind.

She shook her head, having to at least respect the man's resourcefulness at coming up with this economical way of using his ammunition.

Kowalski crossed to her and sighed heavily. "So *now* can I go on vacation?"

April 18, 7:09 a.m.

By the next morning, order was mostly restored.

As the sun rose on a new day, Seichan stood at the edge of the shadowy forest. A borrowed motorcycle was parked behind her. She stared out at the sprawl of the resort, the curve of sand, the bright pool.

Out in the bay, a Portuguese military cruiser bobbed in the water. A pair of ambulances sat on the beach. Overnight, medical crews had turned one floor of the hotel into a makeshift hospital, attending to the injured, trying their best to mitigate the physical and psychological damage inflicted here. The more critically wounded had already been evacuated by helicopter to Ponta Delgada.

She had also reached Painter Crowe last night. He was already working with Portuguese intelligence services to locate Dr. Balchor's lab. The director had also managed to cover her involvement in events here, along with that of Kowalski and Fitzgerald.

The two men were already en route to a small town on the island's far side, where a new plane waited to evacuate them. From there, she would continue to Morocco, while Kowalski headed to Germany to enjoy his vacation.

We're back on schedule . . . as if nothing had happened.

But before she mounted her motorcycle and headed after Kowalski and Fitzgerald, she wanted this moment alone, to take measure of all that *had* happened.

She had crashed here, struck down by blind chance. And

while it was easier to dismiss such a mishap as bad luck, she knew better. She knew exactly *why* she had crashed on this island. It wasn't a matter of being at the *wrong place, wrong time*.

Instead, she was at the *right place, right time*.

So this could happen.

From the shadows, Seichan watched a small girl run across the sunlit terrace, her bright pink dress blooming behind her. She ran into her father and hugged his legs with both arms. He lowered a fresh paper crown to her head, lifted her in his arms, and kissed her on the forehead.

Satisfied, Seichan turned away, drawing deeper into the shadows. She now understood it was darkness where she needed to be, so others could play in the sun.

Happy birthday, Amelia.

What's True, What's Not

At the end of my full-length novels, I love to spell out what's real and what's fiction in my stories. I thought I'd briefly do the same here.

First, I thought I'd share the genesis for this story. I blame it on the season. When I began writing this, October was just around the corner, so I thought what better way to celebrate that spooky month than to craft a Sigma story featuring a haunted hotel, hordes of bats, and rampaging zombies—then throw Kowalski into the mix with a new toy. Speaking of which . . .

Piezer. Kowalski's new toy is based on a true concept being explored by HSARPA—Homeland Security Advanced Research Project. It's a double-barrel shotgun that can fire showers of shocking piezoelectric crystals, with a range of one hundred and fifty feet, all without those pesky Taser wires. So, of course, Sigma Force would be perfect to field test such a prototype, and who else but Kowalski is best suited for this gun? You'll be seeing more of this innovative weapon as it's put through its paces—in ways only Kowalski would think to employ—in the next big Sigma novel, *The Seventh Plague*.

Colossus. The other weapon showcased in this story is based on a Boeing patent for a new HPM (high-powered microwave) deterrent. Like the device featured in the story, Boeing is exploring *crossing* two such beams and modulating the frequency and resonance to produce a unique and powerful effect. Has anyone thought of crossing an HPM with an EMP? So far only me—but I wouldn't put it past someone to explore this possibility. Especially since researchers at the Natural Science Foundation of China have published a paper on how certain wavelengths of an electromagnetic pulse (an EMP) *do* have an effect on the brains of rats, causing an increase in cerebral vascular permeability. Could it create

zombies? Am I wrong to hope it does?

The Azores. I've never been to this Portuguese archipelago in the North Atlantic, but with their verdant grottos, steaming hot springs, crater lakes, and stunning beaches, I'm ready to go when you all are. Let's just not visit a certain resort that's about to have its grand opening.

What's Next?

At this story's conclusion, Seichan is headed on assignment to Marrakesh, and Kowalski is off to visit his girlfriend in Leipzig, Germany, but alas, neither of them will get to enjoy their time apart for very long. Soon the pair will be summoned to join forces yet again, to thwart an ancient peril ripped from the pages of the Bible in *The Seventh Plague*. I hope you enjoy the mayhem to come!

An Excerpt from *The Seventh Plague*

A British archaeologist—a member of an expedition gone missing for over two years—stumbles out of the Egyptian desert. Before he can explain what happened to his team, he dies. But his remains hold a terrifying discovery that only deepens the mystery: Something had begun mummifying his body while he was still alive. Summoned by a former ally at the British Museum, Commander Grayson Pierce of Sigma Force must uncover the truth behind the brutal murder and discover the fate of the missing team.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at the next Sigma Force adventure . . .

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Prologue

Spring, 1324 b.c.

Nubian Desert, South of Egypt

The high priestess knelt naked in the sand and knew it was time. The omens had been building, growing more dire, becoming certainty. To the west, a sandstorm climbed toward the sun, turning the day's blue sky into a dusty darkness, crackling with lightning.

The enemy was almost upon them.

In preparation, Sabah had shaved all the hair from her body, even the brows above her painted eyes. She had bathed in the waters to either side, two tributaries that flowed north out of the deeper desert and joined at this sacred confluence to form the mighty river that the ancient kings of *heqa khaseshet* called the *Nahal*. She pictured its snaking course as it flowed past Luxor, Thebes, and Memphis on its way to the great blue sea that stretched past the river's fertile delta.

Though she had never set eyes upon that region, she had heard tales.

Of our old home, a place of green fields, palms, and a life ruled by the rhythmic flooding of the Nahal . . .

It was from those lands that Sabah's people had fled over a century ago, escaping the time of plagues, starvation, and death, chased by a pharaoh now long dead. Most of the other tribes in the delta had sought refuge in the deserts to the east, conquering the lands out there and creating a kingdom of their own—but her tribe had lived in an area farther south along the river, near the village of Djeba, in the Upper Egyptian district of *Wetjes-Hor*, known as the Throne of Horus.

During the time of darkness and death, her tribe had

uprooted itself and fled up the river, beyond the reach of the Egyptian kingdom and into the Nubian Desert. Her tribe had been scholars and scribes, priests and priestesses, keepers of great knowledge. They had retreated into the empty ranges of Nubia to protect such knowledge during the turbulent times that followed the plagues, when Egypt was beset and overrun by foreigners from the east, a fierce people with faster chariots and stronger bronze weapons who conquered the weakened Egyptian towns with barely an arrow fired.

But that dark time was coming to an end.

Egypt was rising yet again, chasing out the invaders and building monuments to their many victories and spreading ever in this direction.

“*Hemet netjer . . .*” her Nubian assistant—a young man named Tabor—whispered behind her, perhaps sensing her distress or merely trying to remind her of her role as *hemet netjer . . .* the maid of God. “We must go now.”

She understood and rose to her feet.

Tabor’s eyes were upon the storm to the west, clearly the source of his worry, but Sabah noted a wisp of smoke due north, marking the destruction of a town alongside the fifth cataract of the Nahal, the latest conquest by the Egyptian armies. It would not be long before those same forces reached this mighty confluence.

Before that happened, Sabah and the others of her order must hide what they had protected for over a century, a wonder unlike any other: a blessing by God, a cure hidden at the heart of a curse.

Watching the Egyptians creep and spread up along the river, consuming town after town, preparations had been under way for the past thousand days, mostly acts of purification, all to ready her and her order to become immortal vessels for God’s blessing.

Sabah was the last to be allowed this transformation, having already overseen and guided many of her brothers and sisters on this path. Like the others, she had forsaken all millet and grain for the past year, subsisting on nuts, berries, tree bark, and a tea made from a resin carried here from foreign lands. Over the turning of seasons, her flesh had dried to her bones, her breasts and buttocks gone sallow and sunken.

Though only into her third decade, she now needed Tabor's strong back and arms to help her move, even to slip her linen robe back over her head.

As they set off away from the confluence, Sabah watched the sandstorm roll inexorably toward them, laced with lightning born from the roiling clouds of dust. She could sense that energy flowing across the desert. She smelled it in the air, felt it stir the small hairs along her arms. With God's will, those same blowing sands should help cover their handiwork, to bury it under windswept dunes.

But first they had to reach the distant hills.

She concentrated on putting one foot before the other. Still, she feared she had waited too long at the river. By the time she and Tabor reached the deep cleft between two hills, the storm had caught them, howling overhead and scouring any exposed skin with burning sand.

"Hurry, mistress," Tabor urged, all but picking her up. Carried now, she felt her toes brushing the ground, scribing the sand underfoot with indecipherable glyphs of beseechment.

I must not fail . . .

Then they were through the dark doorway and hurrying down a long, steep passageway to the greater wonder sculpted out of the sandstone below. Torches lit the way, flickering shadows all around them, slowly revealing what was hidden, what had been created by artisans and scholars working in tandem for over seven decades.

Tabor helped her over the arcade of large stone teeth and across the sprawl of a sculpted tongue, carved in exquisite detail. Ahead, the chamber bifurcated into two tunnels: one that dove through the rock toward the stone stomach below, the other ringed by small ridges and leading to the cavernous chest cavity.

It was the latter route they took now in great haste.

As Tabor helped her, she pictured the subterranean complex beneath these hills. It had been dug out and fashioned to model the interior workings of a featureless figure in repose, one whose body lay buried under these hills. While this sculpture had no exterior—for the world was its skin—all of the internal details of the human body had been meticulously

carved out of the sandstone, from liver and kidney to bladder and brain.

Beneath the hills, her order had created their own stone God, one large enough to make their home within, to use its body as a vessel to preserve what must be kept safe.

Like I must do now . . . to make of my own body a temple for God's great blessing.

Tabor led her to where the ridge-lined passageway split yet again into two smaller tunnels, marking the same division of airways found in her own chest. He took her to the left, requiring that they duck slightly from the curved roof of the smaller passage. But they did not have far to go.

Torchlight grew brighter ahead as the tunnel ended and opened into a massive cavernous space, seemingly supported by stone ribs that arched up to the carving of a mighty spine overhead. In the room's center sat a stone heart, rising four times her height, again rendered in perfect symmetry, with great curving blood vessels that fanned outward.

She glanced to the handful of other Nubian servants, all on their knees, who awaited her in the chamber.

She stared over to the colonnades of curved stone ribs. Between those ribs, fresh bricks had been used to seal the many alcoves hidden there. They marked the tombs of her brothers and sisters of the order, those who had preceded her into the future. She pictured them seated or slumped on their chairs, their bodies slowly finishing their transformations, becoming vessels for the blessing.

I am the last . . . the chosen maid of God.

She turned from the walls to face the stone heart. A small doorway opened into one of the chambers, a place of great honor.

She shook free of Tabor's arm and took the last steps on her own. She crossed to the doorway, bowed her head low, and climbed inside. Her palm felt the cold stone as she straightened. A silver throne awaited her inside, equally cold as she sat upon it. To one side rested a bowl of carved lapis lazuli. Water filled it to just shy of its silver-embossed brim. She lifted the bowl and let it rest on her thin thighs.

Tabor leaned toward the opening, too pained to speak, but his face was easy to read, full of grief, hope, and fear.

Matching emotions swelled within her own breast—along with a fair amount of doubt. But she nodded to Tabor.

“Let it be done.”

Grief won the battle in his face, but he matched her nod and bowed out.

The other servants came forward and began sealing the entrance with dry bricks of mud and straw. Darkness fell over her, but in the last flicker of torchlight from outside, she stared down at the bowl in her lap, recognizing the dark sheen to the water. It was colored a deep crimson. She knew what she held. It was water from the Nahal, from when the river had been cursed and turned to blood. The water had been collected ages ago and preserved by their order—along with the blessing held at its cursed heart.

As the last brick was set, she swallowed hard, finding her throat suddenly dry. She listened as a fresh coat of mud was smeared over the bricks outside. She also heard the telltale scrape of wood being stacked under the base of the heart, encircling it completely.

She closed her eyes, knowing what was to come.

She pictured torches igniting that bonfire of wood.

Slowly came confirmation as the stone grew warm underfoot. The air inside the heart—already stifling—did not take long to become heated. Any moisture dried away, escaping up the flue of the sculpted vessels. In moments, it felt as if she were breathing hot sand. She gasped as the bottoms of her feet began to burn. Even the silver throne became as hot as the scorched lip of a dune under a summer sun.

Still, she kept quiet. By now, those outside should have exited this underworld, sealing the way behind them. They would leave these lands under the cover of the storm, vanishing away forever, letting the desert erase all evidence of this place.

As she awaited her end, tears flowed from her eyes, only to be dried from her cheeks before they could roll away. Through cracked lips, she sobbed from the pain, from the certainty of what was to come. Then in the darkness came a soft glow. It rose from the basin on her lap, swirling the crimson water with the faintest of shimmers.

She did not know if it was a mirage born of pain, but she

found solace in that glow. It granted her the strength to complete her last act. She lifted the bowl to her lips and drank deeply and fully. The life-giving water flowed down her parched throat and filled her knotted stomach.

By the time she lowered the empty bowl, the heat inside the stone heart had intensified to a blistering agony. Still, she smiled through the pain, knowing what she held within her.

I am your vessel, my Lord . . . now and forever.

9:34 p.m. EST
March 2, 1895
New York City

Now this is more like it . . .

With his goal in sight, Samuel Clemens—better known by his pen name Mark Twain—led his reluctant companion through Gramercy Park. Directly ahead, gaslights beckoned on the far side of the street, illuminating the columns, portico, and ironwork of the Players Club. Both men were members of this exclusive establishment.

Drawn by the promise of laughter, spirits, and good company, Twain increased his pace, moving in great, purposeful strides, trailing a cloud of cigar smoke through the crisp night air. “What do you say, Nikola?” he called back to his chum. “According to my pocket watch and my stomach, Players must still be serving dinner. And barring that, I could use some brandy to go with this cigar.”

Younger by almost two decades, Nikola Tesla was dressed in a stiff suit, worn at the elbows to a dull sheen. He kept swiping at his dark hair and darting glances around. When he was nervous, like now, the man’s Serbian accent grew as thick as his mustache.

“Samuel, my friend, the night is late, and I still have work to finish at my lab. I appreciate the tickets to the theater, but I should be off.”

“Nonsense. Too much work makes for a dull man.”

“Then you must be exceptionally exciting . . . what with

your life of such extreme leisure.”

Twain glanced back with an exaggerated huff. “I’ll have you know I’m working on another book.”

“Let me guess,” Nikola offered with a wry smile. “Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer get into more trouble.”

“If only those two bastards would!” Twain chuckled, drawing the eye of a passerby. “Then I might be able to pay off my creditors.”

Though Twain kept it quiet, he had declared bankruptcy last year, turning over all of his copyrights to his wife, Olivia. To help pay off his debts, he was due to head out on an around-the-world lecture tour over the next twelve months.

Still, the mention of money had soured the moment. Twain kicked himself for mentioning it, knowing Nikola was struggling as much as he was with financial hardships, despite his friend being a veritable genius, a polymath who was equal parts inventor, electrical engineer, and physicist. Twain had spent many afternoons at the man’s South Fifth Avenue laboratory, the two becoming great friends.

“Maybe one drink,” Nikola conceded with a sigh.

They headed across the street toward the portico under the hissing gas lamps. But before they could reach the entrance, a figure stepped from the shadows to accost them both.

“Thank God,” the man said as he ambushed them. “I heard from your doorman that you might end up here tonight.”

Momentarily taken aback, Twain finally recognized the fellow. Surprised and delighted, he clapped his old friend on the shoulder. “Well met, Stanley! What are you doing here? I thought you were still in England.”

“I only arrived back yesterday.”

“Wonderful! Then let’s celebrate your return to our shores by raising a glass or two. Maybe even three.”

Twain moved to draw the other two men inside with him, only to be stopped by Stanley at the threshold.

“As I understand it,” Stanley said, “you have the ear of Thomas Edison.”

“I . . . I suppose I do,” Twain answered hesitantly, knowing all too well of the deep-seated friction between Edison and his companion this night, Nikola Tesla.

“I have a matter of urgency to discuss with the inventor,

something to show him, a task given to me by the Crown.”

“Truly? What a tantalizing bit of intrigue.”

“Perhaps I could help,” Nikola offered.

As the two men were unacquainted, Twain made proper introductions, acting as a potential matchmaker for this strange affair. “Nikola, this is Henry Morton Stanley—soon to be *Sir* Stanley if the rumors hold true—famed not only as an explorer in his own right but also regaled for his discovery of David Livingstone, a fellow explorer lost in the darkest heart of Africa.”

“Ah,” Nikola said, “I remember now, especially how you greeted him. ‘*Dr. Livingstone, I presume?*’ ”

Stanley groaned. “I never said those exact words.”

Twain smiled and turned to his other friend. “And this is Nikola Tesla, as much a genius in his own right as Edison, perhaps more so.”

Stanley’s eyes grew wider upon this introduction. “Of course. I should have recognized you.”

This drew some color to Nikola’s pale cheeks.

“So,” Twain began, “upon what dire mission has the British Crown assigned you?”

Stanley wiped a damp palm across his thinning gray hair. “As you know, Livingstone was lost in Africa while seeking the true source of the Nile. Something I’ve sought myself in the past.”

“Yes, you and many other Brits. Apparently it’s a quest on par with finding the Holy Grail for you all.”

Stanley scowled but did not discount his words.

Twain suspected that the drive behind such a concerted search by the British had less to do with geographical curiosity than it did with the country’s colonial ambitions in Africa, but for once he held his tongue, fearing he might scare his friend off before the night’s mystery revealed itself.

“So how does the source of the Nile concern the British Crown?” Twain pressed.

Stanley drew him closer and pulled a small object from his pocket. It was a glass vial full of a dark liquid. “This was only recently discovered among the relics of David Livingstone’s estate. A Nubian warrior—someone whom Livingstone had helped by saving the man’s sick son—had given David an

ancient talisman, a small vessel sealed with wax and carved with hieroglyphics. This vial holds a small sample of the water found inside that talisman, water which the tribesman claimed came from the Nile itself.”

Twain shrugged. “Why’s that significant?”

Stanley stepped away and raised the vial toward one of the gas lamps. Under the flickering flame, the liquid inside glowed a rich crimson.

“According to Livingstone’s papers, the water was said to be thousands of years old, drawn from the ancient Nile when the river had turned to blood.”

“Turned to blood?” Nikola asked. “Like in the Old Testament?”

Twain smiled, suspecting Stanley was trying to set him up. The explorer knew of his personal disdain for organized religion. They’d had many heated discourses on that very subject. “So you’re claiming this came from Moses’s biblical plague, the *first* of the ten he cast upon the Egyptians?”

Stanley’s expression never wavered. “I know how this sounds.”

“It can’t possibly—”

“Twenty-two men are dead at the Royal Society. Slain when the Nubian talisman was first opened and its contents tested in a laboratory.”

A moment of stunned silence followed.

“How did they die?” Nikola finally asked. “Was it a poison?”

Stanley had paled. Here was a man who had faced all manner of dread beast, debilitating fever, and cannibal savages with nary a sign of fear. He now looked terrified.

“Not a poison.”

“Then what?” Twain asked.

With deadpan seriousness, Stanley answered, “A curse. A plague out of the distant past.” He closed his fist around the vial. “For this is indeed a remnant of God’s ancient wrath upon the Egyptians—but it’s only the beginning if we don’t stop what is to come.”

“What can be done?” Twain asked.

Stanley turned to Nikola. “You must come to England.”

“To do what?” Twain asked.

“To stop the next plague.”

Chapter 1

Present Day

May 28, 11:32 p.m. EET

Cairo, Egypt

From the coroner's nervous manner, Derek Rankin knew something was wrong. "Show us the body."

Dr. Badawi gave a small bow of his head and lifted an arm toward the morgue's elevator. "If you'll follow me, please."

As the coroner led them away, Derek glanced to his two companions, uncertain how they would handle these last steps of this grim journey. The older of the two women, Safia al-Maaz, stood a head taller than her younger companion, Jane McCabe. The group had arrived by private jet from London this morning, landing at the Cairo airport before being whisked to the city's morgue, a nondescript set of blue buildings within a stone's throw of the Nile.

As they followed the coroner, Safia kept a protective, motherly arm around the younger woman, who was only twenty-one.

Derek caught Safia's eyes, silently asking her, *Can Jane handle this?*

Safia took a deep breath and nodded to him. She was his boss, a senior curator at the British Museum. He had joined the museum four years ago, hired as an assistant keeper, a low-level curatorship. His specialty was bio-archaeology, with a focus on investigating past human health. By studying the condition of dental, skeletal, and tissue remains, he tried to piece together a more complete assessment of the physical conditions of ancient peoples, sometimes even calculating a cause of death for certain individuals. During his prior fellowship with the University College London, he had

investigated various epidemics, including the Black Death in Europe and the Great Famine in Ireland.

His current project with the British Museum involved analyzing mummies recovered from a region surrounding the Nile's Sixth Cataract, where a new dam was being built in the Sudan. That arid zone had been rarely studied, but with the new construction under way, the Sudan Archaeological Research Society had sought the assistance of the British Museum to help salvage the region of its archaeological treasures before it was all lost. Just in the last few months, the project had managed to preserve significant swaths of rock art, including digging up and transporting the 390 blocks of a small Nubian pyramid.

It was this very project that led them all here, a project many considered cursed when the lead researcher vanished two years ago, along with an entire survey team. After months of searching for the group, the loss was eventually attributed to foul play, likely due to the region's instability following the Arab Spring uprisings and subsequent political unrest. Though half the survey team was Sudanese, it was still unwise for foreigners to be traipsing in such remote areas where bandits and rebels held sway. Even an act of terrorism was considered, but no group ever claimed responsibility, nor were there any ransom demands.

The entire museum had been shaken by this loss. The team leader, Professor Harold McCabe—while not beloved due to his intractable nature—was well respected in his field. In fact, it had been Professor McCabe's involvement with the project that had convinced Derek to join this salvage effort. McCabe had been Derek's teacher and mentor during his early years at the University College London, even helping him attain his fellowship.

So the man's death had hit Derek deeply—but not as deeply as the youngest member of their group today.

He studied Jane McCabe as she entered the elevator. The young woman stood with her arms crossed, her gaze a thousand miles away. She was Harold's daughter. Derek noted the slight pebbling of sweat on her forehead and upper lip. The day was sweltering, and the morgue's air-conditioning did little to hold back the heat. But he suspected the perspiration

had less to do with the temperature than with the trepidation at what she must confront.

Safia touched her elbow before the elevator doors closed. “Jane, you can still wait up here. I knew your father well enough to handle the identification.”

Derek nodded his support, reaching out to stop the doors from gliding shut.

Jane’s stare steadied and hardened. “I must do this,” she said. “After waiting two years for any answers—about my father, about my brother—I’m not about to . . .”

Her voice cracked, which only seemed to irritate the young woman. Her older brother, Rory, had accompanied her father on the expedition, vanishing along with all the others, leaving Jane alone in the world. Her mother had died six years ago following a protracted battle with ovarian cancer.

Jane reached forward and knocked Derek’s arm down, allowing the elevator doors to close.

Safia let out a small sigh, plainly resigned to the young woman’s decision.

Derek had expected no other response from Jane. She was too much like her father: stubborn, willful, and brilliant in her own right. Derek had known Jane for as long as he had known her father. Back then she had been sixteen and already in an accelerated undergraduate program at the same university. By the age of nineteen, she had a PhD in anthropology and was now in a postdoctoral program, clearly determined to follow in her father’s footsteps.

Which unfortunately, in the end, only led her here.

As the elevator descended, Derek studied the two women. Though they both shared a passion for antiquities, they couldn’t be more different. Safia’s Middle Eastern heritage was evident in the light mocha of her skin and the long fall of dark hair, half-hidden under a loose headscarf. She was dressed modestly in dark slacks and a long-sleeved light blue blouse. Even her manner was soft-spoken, yet she could easily command attention. There was something about those emerald green eyes that could stop a man cold if necessary.

Jane, on the other hand, was much like her father, who was Scottish. Her hair was a fiery red, cut in a masculine bob. Unfortunately, her personality was just as fiery. Derek had

heard stories of her browbeating fellow students, sometimes even her professors, if they disagreed with her. She was plainly her father's daughter, but in one way the two were very different. Harold's skin had been tanned to a wrinkled leather from decades under the desert sun, while Jane's skin was pale and smooth from her years spent in university libraries. The only blemish was a slight freckling over her nose and cheeks, giving her a girlish appearance that many mistook for naïveté.

Derek knew better than that.

The elevator bumped to a stop. As the doors opened, the biting smell of bleach wafted into the cage, along with an underlying whiff of decay. Dr. Badawi led them all into a basement passageway of whitewashed concrete walls and worn linoleum floors. The coroner moved quickly, his small frame wrapped in a knee-length white lab coat. He clearly wanted to dispose of this matter as quickly as possible—but something also had him on edge.

Badawi reached the end of the hallway and brushed through a thick drape of plastic that closed off a small room. Derek followed with the two women. In the room's center rested a single stainless steel table. Atop it, a body lay under a crisp sheet.

Despite her firm insistence on being here, Jane faltered at the threshold. Safia stayed at her side, while Derek followed the coroner to the table. Behind him, he heard Jane mumble that she was okay.

Badawi glanced to the women, nervously bumping into a steel scale hanging beside the table. He whispered to Derek. "Perhaps you should view first. Maybe it is improper for women to be here at this time."

Jane heard him and responded to the veiled misogyny. "No." She stalked forward with Safia. "I need to know if this is my father."

Derek read more in her expression. She wanted answers, some way to explain the years of uncertainty and false hopes. But most of all, she needed to let the ghost of her father go.

"Let's get this over with," Safia urged.

Badawi bowed his head slightly. He stepped to the table and folded back the top half of the sheet, exposing the naked

upper torso of the body.

Derek gasped and took a full step back. His first reaction was negation. This could not be Harold McCabe. The corpse on the table looked like something dug out of the sands after being buried for centuries. The skin had sunk to the sharp contours of the facial bones and ribs. Even stranger, the surface was a dark walnut color with a shiny complexion, almost as if the body had been varnished. But after the momentary shock wore off, Derek noted the grayish red hair sprouting from the body's scalp, cheeks, and chin and knew his initial assessment was wrong.

Jane recognized this, too. "Dad . . ."

Derek glanced back. Despair and anguish racked Jane's features. She turned away and buried her face in Safia's chest. Safia's expression was only slightly less despairing than the girl's. Safia had known Harold for far longer than Derek. But he also read the crinkle of confusion on her brow.

Derek could guess the cause of her consternation and voiced it to the coroner. "I thought Professor McCabe was still alive when he was discovered ten days ago."

Badawi nodded. "A family of nomads found him stumbling through the desert, about a kilometer outside the town of Rufaa." The coroner cast a sympathetic glance toward Jane. "They brought him by cart to the village, but he died before reaching help."

"That timeline makes no sense," Safia said. "The body here looks so much older."

Derek agreed, having had the same visceral reaction. Still, he returned his attention to the table, perplexed by another mystery. "You say Professor McCabe's remains arrived two days ago by truck and that no one had embalmed his body, only wrapped him in plastic. Was the vehicle refrigerated?"

"No. But the body was put into a cooler once it arrived at the morgue."

Derek glanced to Safia. "It's been ten days, with the body kept at stifling temperatures. Yet I'm seeing very little evidence of postmortem decay. No significant bloating, no cracking of skin. He looks almost preserved."

The only damage was a Y-incision across the torso from the autopsy. Derek had read the coroner's report while en route

from London. No cause of death was confirmed, but heat exposure and dehydration were the most likely culprits. Still, that diagnosis did little to tell Professor McCabe's true story.

Where had he been all of this time?

Safia pursued this very question. "Were you able to get any more information from this family of nomads? Did Professor McCabe offer any explanation for his whereabouts prior to being found in the desert? Any word about his son or the others?"

Badawi gazed at his toes as he answered Safia. "Nothing that makes sense. He was weak, delirious, and the group who came upon him only spoke a dialect of Sudanese Arabic."

"My father was fluent in many variants of Arabic," Jane pressed.

"That's true," Safia said. "If there's anything he was able to communicate before dying . . ."

Badawi sighed. "I didn't write this in the report, but one of the nomads said Professor McCabe claimed to have been swallowed by a giant."

Safia frowned. "Swallowed by a giant?"

Badawi shrugged. "Like I said, he was severely dehydrated, likely delirious."

"And nothing else?" Safia asked.

"Only one word, mumbled over and over again as he was being driven to the village of Rufaa."

"What was that?"

Badawi looked toward the young woman next to Safia. "Jane."

Harold's daughter had stiffened at this revelation, looking both wounded and lost.

As Safia kept hold of her, Derek used the moment to gently examine the body. He pinched and tested the elasticity of the skin. It appeared oddly thickened, almost hard. He then slipped free a bony hand and checked the fingernails, which were a peculiar shade of yellow.

He spoke to Badawi. "Your report said you found a collection of small rocks in the man's stomach, all the same size and shape."

"Yes. About as big as quail eggs."

"You also found pieces of what you believed to be tree

bark.”

“That’s correct. I suspect hunger drove him to eat whatever he could find in the desert, to perhaps dull the pangs from starvation.”

“Or maybe their presence was due to another reason.”

“What reason?” Safia asked as she held Jane.

Derek stepped back. “I’ll need more tests to confirm my suspicion. Skin biopsies, definitely a toxicological study of those gastric contents.” In his head, he ran through everything he wanted done. “But most importantly, I’ll want a scan of his brain.”

“What are you thinking?” Safia pressed him.

“From the state of the body—its ancient appearance, the peculiarly preserved nature of the remains—I think Professor McCabe has been mummified.”

Badawi flinched, looked both aggrieved and affronted. “I can assure you that no one has molested this man’s body after his death. No one would dare.”

“You misunderstand me, Dr. Badawi. I don’t think he was mummified *after* his death.” He looked to Safia. “But *before*.”

About the Author

JAMES ROLLINS is the #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of international thrillers, which have been translated into more than forty languages. His Sigma series has been lauded as one of the “top crowd pleasers” (*New York Times*) and one of the “hottest summer reads” (*People Magazine*). He lives in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

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